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AUTHOR	Chambliss, Catherine
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Change itself often threatens efficiency. This is ironic, given that organizational changes are frequently made because of a need for increased efficiency. Academic departments within a wide variety of institutions are wrestling with this irony on a daily basis. Expanding systems and staffing, and adoption of new computer systems, all intended to increase productivity, all too often actually compromise departmental effectiveness, if mismatched. Various strategies for academic department chairs to use in managing both staffing and technology changes, including illustrative examples, are examined. (SLD)

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Managing Academic Departments:

Protecting Productivity in the Face of Staffing and Technology Changes

Catherine Chambliss, Ph.D.

Chair, Department of Psychology

Ursinus College

Collegeville, PA 19426

(610) 409-3000 x2488

email: cchambliss@ursinus.edu

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Change itself often threatens efficiency. This is ironic, given that organizational changes are frequently made because of a need for increased efficiency. Academic departments within a wide variety of institutions are wrestling with this irony on a daily basis. Expanding systems and staffing, and adoption of new computer systems, all intended to increase productivity, all too often actually compromise departmental effectiveness if mismanaged. Various strategies for academic department chairs to use in managing both staffing and technology changes, including illustrative examples, are examined.

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Catherine Chambliss, Ph.D.

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Introduction

The current competitive, cost-conscious era in higher education is compelling an accelerated pace of change, while simultaneously demanding increased efficiency and accountability. Ironically, change itself often threatens efficiency. Expansion of systems, increased staffing, and adoption of new computer systems, although intended to increase productivity, can actually compromise departmental effectiveness if mismanaged. As a result, academic department chairs play a critical role, because their management of both staffing and technology changes can help to assure that innovations are more of a blessing than a curse.

Managing academic departments during period of high staff turnover and technology change is a considerable challenge. This paper will explore the experiences of several faculty members and administrators at Ursinus, a small liberal arts college located near Philadelphia, where a highly participatory process was used to engage as many faculty members as possible in

the development of two initiatives. The first involved changing our approach to faculty hiring and assimilation. Several measures were taken to improve upon the selection process and the first year indoctrination. The second initiative involved adoption of a campus laptop program with universal software packages for students and faculty, and the gradual phasing out of non-laptop resources.

For several years, this institution has explicitly recognized the importance of various initiatives aimed at improving the freshman experience for incoming students (Chambliss & Fago, 1987; Chambliss 1990; Chambliss, 1991), enhancing visible student achievement such as research participation and study abroad (Chambliss 1997; Chambliss 1998), and enhancing visible faculty achievement (Chambliss, 1999; Chambliss 1994; Chambliss, 1993). This history of support for innovation has helped to create an organizational climate that encourages both experienced and novice faculty and staff alike to think creatively about ways to increase the college's ability to transform its students and prepare them effectively for their futures.

Details associated with some of the processes used to augment faculty strategically and to incorporate universal computer technology on a small liberal arts campus have been previously described (Chambliss, 2001; Chambliss 1999). Collaborative processes were used to develop consensual criteria that proved helpful in making these departmental and college-wide transitions. Strategies for more general application of these initiatives to other types of campuses are encouraged, given the positive outcomes experienced (Chambliss, 1997; Chambliss, 1994).

Staffing Changes: Hiring and Retiring Faculty

The department chair's approach to hiring new faculty and facilitating the newcomer's assimilation into the functioning department can shape the faculty member's experience for decades to come. Easing transitions for retiring faculty are equally important to department

functioning.

Strategic hiring tactics are aimed at filling the "personality" gaps within a department as well as the disciplinary gaps. There is a tendency for likeness to lead to liking, creating the temptation to hire in a fashion that duplicates existing styles and strengths. Assessing the current faculty's personality styles can help chairs decide such things as whether an introverted, private workhorse writer or an extraverted, collaborative social facilitator would be the optimal type of person to hire.

After hiring the most appropriate candidate, chairs help to shape the new faculty member's allocation of time by helping to structure professional priorities. As institutions have changed, it is common for the expectations of newcomers to exceed that of more experienced faculty with tenure. Managing these dual expectations within the department poses special challenges. "Marrying" the oldtimers and the new faculty in a way which optimizes mutual productivity requires sensitivity to the potential for perceived inequity. New faculty are often held to higher performance standards because evolving institutions "raise the bar", making it understandable for them to resent their less pressured older colleagues. More experienced faculty often envy the research resources provided their younger colleagues.

In acclimating new faculty it is also important to be sensitive to the problem of reactance. When individuals' perceive a threat to their freedom, they often respond in counterproductive, oppositional ways, in order to reassert their freedom. Helping new faculty to identify with the goals of the department and the institutions, and to internalize the achievement standards of the department, can help to increase faculty satisfaction and accomplishment.

In today's student-centered climate, it is often challenging for new faculty to develop

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appropriate performance expectations for students. The pressure to keep students happy can be formidable for untenured faculty eager to maintain positive student evaluations. Helping the new faculty member recognize the value of ambitious standards for students early on can help to establish a desirable tone in their courses that will endure over time.

Accommodating perfectionism among faculty members is a common problem for department chairs. Most faculty were straight A students, who are often unaccustomed to anything but the most glowing praise. Oversensitivity to criticism is quite common. Developing means of helping all faculty members to feel like winners can improve morale and enhance productivity. Directing competitive impulses outside the department, and ideally outside the institution altogether, can channel faculty members' ambition in ways that are less destructive.

In guiding the department's response to both successes and setbacks, it is helpful for chairs to foster the use of constructive causal attributions. Attributing Negative outcomes to personal, pervasive, and permanent sources often depresses subsequent performance by reducing morale. Encouraging faculty members to consider appropriate external, specific, and unstable attributions for negative events can facilitate effective problem solving and mobilize beneficial action. Alternatively, facilitating faculty members' internal, global, and stable attributions for their successes is associated with improvements in self esteem and productivity.

Within our department, as we have incorporated new faculty members, we have found it very helpful to link increasing scholarly expectations of faculty to our growing emphasis on student outcomes. Pressuring tenured faculty to be more productive in their research can often produce massive resistance and ill-will. It can foster petty rivalries and create destructive competition within the campus. One way of diffusing these problems, that seems to have

benefitted the Ursinus campus, involves couching higher faculty productivity expectations in terms of consensually desired improvements in student achievement. Priority is given to research activities that are integrated with the faculty member's teaching role. Collaborative involvement of students in research projects is recognized as a premier form of professional activity. Presenting and publishing papers coauthored with students is explicitly valued.

The focus is on helping students to acquire professional skills in their discipline, and to develop a record of accomplishment that demonstrates their competence. Use of student portfolios and resume-development workshops maintain faculty emphasis on the goal of enhancing students' career options. By divesting faculty of sole ownership of a research project, and defining a main purpose of faculty scholarship as educational, all faculty projects seem to be experienced as more communal property of the entire department. Greater altruistic response seems to flow from the perception that the entire group of faculty members benefits from the success of each individual's projects, because such success is linked clearly to the mutual goal of enhancing the reputation of the department's ability to profit students and "add value". All faculty flexibly accommodate one another's projects, refer appropriate students, share resources and technical expertise, and conduct common workshops (e.g., to familiarize students with the use of statistical software). When a faculty member is unavailable to help a student, someone else eagerly pitches in, fostering an atmosphere students perceive as caring and committed.

Since the department's expectation is 100% student involvement in research, each faculty member is appreciated for their willingness to supervise as many student researchers as their team projects can accommodate. Therefore, rather than being jealous of a professor whose specialization area attracts a disproportionate number of students, faculty members are

appreciative for their proportionally reduced burden. Rather than selfishly protect their disproportionately large number of interested research students, the professors in more popular subdisciplines have an incentive (reduced workload) to work with fellow faculty to help them develop more compellingly attractive research options.

Framing liberal arts college faculty scholarship as something we primarily do for our students, seems to diffuse destructive ego-involvement, and build a sense of common purpose. It allows faculty to work together more optimally, and provides a more ideal role model experience for students. (Contrast the above description of collaboration with what occurs in many departments with competitive climates, where students repeatedly observe the fine arts of peer back-stabbing and sabotaging). One indicator of the impact of this desirable observational learning is the success our students have had in creating high quality team projects. They generously give their time and energy, and comfortably share credit and a sense of victory. There have been surprisingly few complaints of inequities, despite the wide range of ability levels among students within the department and how this inevitably contributes to disparities in contributions across students.

Promoting widespread public endorsement of a common "bottom line," through planned discussions about how to link institutional priorities and revised faculty evaluation criteria, appears to have increased individual productivity, student productivity, and support for the efforts of others. Team spirit is often enhanced when participants have the opportunity to articulate how their individual successes foster the common good. Our ongoing dialogue also permitted faculty to develop better ways of learning from one another's experiences with various solutions to the shared problem of increasing student outcomes while holding resources constant.

Technology Innovation: Trick or Treat?

Department chairs play an important role in helping their departments deploy new technology. Nothing poses a greater threat to today's students than educational settings that permit them to shirk their responsibility to become and remain technologically literate. Similarly, even the best faculty will fail if they are unwilling or ill-equipped to develop new technology skills themselves. Rightly or wrongly, all educators are now held captive by new technologies. Institutions have no choice other than to participate; technological complacency is not an option.

Like it or not, we are hostage to our own ability to innovate and the untoward effects of market forces favoring rapid obsolescence. New software requires new hardware to run. New hardware requires new training to maintain and repair. All users must flexibly adapt to new systems. If this is not to exhaust us, if this is not to absorb an ever-expanding percentage of our professional and institutional resources (time, money, and energy), we must find ways to be more systematic and efficient in applying new technologies...to innovate "smarter". In doing this, finding ways of obtaining maximal benefits while minimizing costs may be the major challenge facing academic departments.

As campuses struggle to afford the computing resources the best students now routinely expect, it is important for them to establish clear priorities before deploying finite resources. Although unreliable or outdated equipment will jeopardize the achievement of students, budget limitations make it difficult to meet all their needs. Universal laptop computing programs can help to enhance the level of student accomplishment on campus, with cost-effectiveness in mind.

Patchwork assembly of computing systems can lead to fragmentation, isolation of different user groups, breakdown of communication, and reduced collegiality. Competition for scarce

computing funds has damaged goodwill among many academic departments. Most departments have been plagued by unreliable operation of equipment, maintenance nightmares, incompatible languages creating communication barriers, and rapid obsolescence of learning resources (e.g., data entry mechanisms, lab exercises) producing mass frustration and inability to revise texts (thereby discouraging scholarly persistence among faculty).

However, in addition to driving us crazy, technology can also help to address some of the perennial sources of tension on college campuses (e.g., debates about the relative value of Innovation versus Tradition, arguments over the superiority of the ways of knowing of the Sciences versus the Humanities, etc.). It can facilitate communication among previously warring factions, and thereby build greater empathy and mutual respect. It can reduce destructive defensiveness, by providing common tools across disciplines. Increasingly, software shapes how we work and think. It can influence how we learn, explore, write, and analyze data. It guides the way we ask and answer questions. Sharing software can therefore build greater interdisciplinary "common ground". The stage is set as well for "common groan" (say when the main campus server goes down and all share in the universal frustration). Furthermore, shared technology can encourage cross-fertilization of ideas, enriching disparate fields with fresh perspectives. The easy, informal sharing permitted by smoothly functioning email systems creates a climate of greater openness and willingness to take intellectual risks.

Done right, programs for incorporating new educational technologies yield in-class enhancement and invigoration. They allow valuable experiential learning involving data manipulation, problem solving techniques, collaborative writing. Faculty members can be stimulated to look at old questions in new ways, which can sometimes improve their

understanding of how students feel, motivating them to approach content afresh.

Technology can transform the role of student in various beneficial ways. Learners become highly active participants in the educational process, producing and sharing knowledge, rather than passively memorizing facts. Courses become more egalitarian and democratic; technology can remove the communication barriers of roles, race, etc. With easy electronic access to faculty and peers, students become "24/7 learners". Students who are generally reluctant to disagree publicly with a professor during a class meeting may find it easier to express their opinions using electronic means. Technology can foster more democratic airing of ideas and opinions.

Technology can also transform the role of faculty. Faculty increasingly serve as learning facilitators, rather than as storehouses of all the information. Technology permits more ambitious connections across departments. Many experience enhanced collegiality, in part because they share the same frustrations with confusing software faced by those across other disciplines. Busy faculty have an easier time actively participating in the global intellectual community, collaborating with others working at great distances, becoming more active in grant-writing, experiencing increased productivity thanks to technology enabling more efficient working. Universal technology has also reduced wasteful meetings, thereby freeing time for meaningful face-to-face interactions between faculty and students.

Ursinus College's use of universal technology has also fostered desirable changes in interaction patterns. It has made interactions less formal, thereby transforming relationships so they become less adversarial. By building empathy across groups, animosity has been reduced. In some ways it has increased mutual accountability and understanding, producing less tolerance of cheating among students and less condoning of "student-blasting" among faculty. It has helped to

establish conditions for more positive risk-taking on the part of both faculty and students. It has provided an open forum for discussion of touchy issues, because of the sense of psychological protection many experience when communicating electronically. It has enabled members of the campus community to participate simultaneously in multiple communities. As potential group involvement increases, people feel more connected to the institution. It broadens the campus' reach, by enabling people to maintain contact with a wide array of friends. In addition, alumni experience greater continuity and sense of belonging after graduation, thanks to easy access to all their former professors and school administrators. It is anticipated that this will eventually have a positive impact on college fund-raising and development efforts.

At the department level, it is important for us to emphasize the big picture of institutional objectives in making decisions about technology. We need to emphasize the ends, rather than the means, not in a Machiavellian manner, but in a way that avoids unnecessary distraction by wasteful processes. Although using new software gimmickry can attract attention, as chairs we might want to underscore the fact that if such implementation frustrates other users, it is undesirable and we won't be impressed. This will discourage thoughtless use of new software that actually inconveniences others (e.g., who can't download snazzy attachments easily, or have email review slowed by their computer's need to engage special software, or are bored while a presenter struggles to get a complex PowerPoint presentation underway). Using technology for technology's sake is a bad idea.

Communicating our assumptions about individuals' use of technology is increasingly important. Not all faculty members keep their email on all day; not all even check their email daily. If these differences are not articulated, major communication mishaps can occur. It may make

sense to reach some department-wide (if not institution-wide) ground rules about expected email and voice mail accountability. How frequently are messages checked? Can individual preferences be obliged (some prefer to be reached via phonemail, others via email)? Email might be avoided when requests demand immediate responses, since it is harder for most people to stay on email continuously.

Netiquette should be observed conscientiously. It is often useful to ask colleagues to acknowledge simple receipt of messages via the subject line conventions, which obviate the need to open quick replies. Other time saving conventions, such as the use f the subject line for posing simple queries, can help reduce the amount of time wasted on accumulated email.

To progress most expediently, faculty must embrace a common understanding of their purpose, explore alternative ways of reaching those goals, and habitually assess the efficiency and efficacy of particular faculty activities through outcomes assessment using student impact as the prime criterion. Maximizing departmental effectiveness requires consensus about educational purpose and how it can be measured, creative consideration of innovative methods to maximize both student and faculty productivity, and collaborative sharing of lessons learned during experimentation. Enhancing departments through the addition of talented new blood and horizon-shattering technology requires a focus on long-term objectives, sensitivity to the psychological challenges posed by change itself, and optimism about the system's ability to adjust over time.

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